

1. Abstract of the Program

In March 2003, the County of San Diego embarked upon a partnership among agencies which have a stake in reducing the incidence of abuse and neglect among elders through reviewing suspicious deaths. This collaboration has resulted in numerous recommendations, including forging a stronger link between Adult Protective Services (APS) and the Medical Examiner's office (ME). This new project, named the Medical Examiner's Report Team (MERT), allows for timely exchange of information between APS and the ME to ensure that deaths which might have been the result of elder abuse and neglect can be identified and investigated timely. Each day, the ME's office electronically sends a list of deaths that have been reported to their office to Aging and Independence Services (AIS), the umbrella agency for APS. Call Center staff at AIS, who have expertise in searching the APS database, cross check all names on the list to look for any matches. The matches are then sent to designated APS staff, who review the case to determine if any information in the APS database would be relevant to the ME's investigation of the death. In addition, the ME investigators can contact APS on a 24/7 basis if they need immediate information.

2. The Problem/ Need for the Program

The incidence of elder abuse and neglect is on the rise. With the oldest members of the baby boomer generation turning sixty in the next year, expectations are that the problem will continue to grow. According to the National Center on Elder Abuse, between 1 in 5 and 1 in 14 incidences of elder abuse go unreported. At times, these occurrences result in the death of the elder due to abuse and neglect. When an elderly person dies, it is often unrecognized that the death occurred for a reason other than natural causes since this is the expectation of society. However, the fact remains that many of the suspicious deaths that are reported to the Elder Death Review Team for review could have been prevented at some level. These deaths can also be especially difficult to prosecute if a crime has been committed because the crime might not be recognized for days, weeks, or even months after the individual dies, leaving little physical evidence. The Elder Death Review Team is charged by statute with making recommendations to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and neglect as well as increase the prosecution of any crimes relating to these deaths. Out of the collaboration between the parties represented on the Elder Death Review Team came the Medical Examiner's Report Team (MERT). MERT was designed to identify suspicious deaths early on and alert authorities to the need for a thorough investigation. These deaths are identified through collaboration between the Medical Examiner's office and Aging & Independence Services, Adult Protective Services (APS). It is the mandate of APS to investigate abuse and neglect of elders and dependent adults.

3. Description of the Program

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The Medical Examiner's Report Team was designed through relationships established in the Elder Death Review Team (EDRT). During the EDRT meetings, it was discovered that the earlier a death was identified as suspicious, the better the chance of preserving evidence and enhancing the possibility for prosecution. As a result, the Medical Examiner's (ME) office and Aging and Independence Services (AIS) worked to produce a protocol for the exchange of information regarding elders whose deaths were reported to the ME for investigation. The objectives of this program were established to increase communication between Adult Protective Services (APS) and the Medical Examiner's Office, to better identify suspicious elder deaths and to establish trends and data related to elder deaths in San Diego County. This protocol established the Medical Examiner Review Team (MERT).

The team consists of ME Staff, AIS Call Center staff and APS staff. Each day, the ME's office notifies Adult Protective Services of all elder deaths reported to their office in the previous 24 hours. AIS Call Center staff, experts in matching information in their database, search their records to determine if the decedent had any previous Adult Protective Services history. APS staff reviews this history and reports any relevant case information, utilizing the formal sharing relationship sanctioned by law through the Multidisciplinary Team, to the Medical Examiner. Based on information provided, the Medical Examiner may conduct further investigation to determine whether an autopsy and/or law enforcement intervention is needed. Initial planning of this project began in April 2005 and involved one meeting between ME staff and AIS staff. A pilot project was initiated to determine the need and efficacy of the project. This pilot ran through August 2005. At that time, it was determined that the project had been successful in providing increased collaboration between the Medical Examiner and Adult Protective Services. The Medical Examiner has conducted further investigation and considered an autopsy in a couple of cases, which otherwise would have been waived. The pilot project also established a correlation between Adult Protective Services history and ME notification.

It was determined in September 2005 that the pilot project would become an established protocol between the two agencies. In addition to the daily review of deaths reported to the ME's office, it was determined that the time sensitive nature of death investigations required Adult Protective Services staff to be available for consultation with Medical Examiner Investigators 24 hours per day. This was incorporated into the project. The intention of continuing this project is to provide better tracking and compiling of data, allowing for incidence trending by Adult Protective Services and the Ombudsman and to identify suspicious deaths in Long Term Care facilities for possible review by the Elder Death Review Team. Furthermore, in November 2005, AIS and ME staff met with officials from Sharp Healthcare to expand this protocol to include local Sharp hospitals. This collaboration will ensure that any abused or neglected elder who passes away after being admitted to a Sharp hospital will immediately be reported to the ME's office. By ensuring this report is made, Sharp will assist in identifying suspicious elder deaths early on which will reduce any lag time in locating information during the ME's investigation.

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This public/private partnership will result in increased communication and collaboration between the partners.

4. Use of Technology

Technology is key in the development of this project. Each day the ME's office e-mail's a list of decedents to AIS, using Microsoft Excel to transmit the list. This list is cross matched with the AIS Suite database. The AIS Suite, which uses a SQL server, is proprietary software created by Adult Protective Services for client information, assessments and service plans. The database allows anyone on the ME Review Team to access information about any case, open or closed, to search for relevant information for the investigation. Then, this information is e-mailed to the ME's office. Additionally, if the ME's office is working on an investigation after normal working hours, the on-call worker is able to immediately access the database to look up and provide information instantaneously. The time element is critical for death investigations. By using technology, APS is able to provide the most updated information in a timely manner.

5. The Cost of the Program

There were no capital costs incurred by APS and the ME to implement MERT because both entities had existing technology that could be used for this project. The ME utilizes Microsoft Excel to communicate the decedent list to APS each morning. APS then searches the *AIS Application Suite* database, which is part of a customized computer software system, for any APS contacts with each decedent. The annual operating costs are approximated below:

Operating Costs

Expenses	Annual Costs
Salaries:	
ME Staff	\$4,550
AIS Call Center Staff	\$11,424
APS Reviewers	\$11,062
Coordinators (ME and APS)	\$5,568
Supplies (paper, toner)	\$160
Total	\$32,765

The estimated salary expenses are based on staff time that is dedicated to MERT by both APS and ME. Each morning, ME staff compile a list of all decedents over the age of 65 who have been reported to their office in the previous 24 hours. They input this information into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and email the list to the AIS Call Center Staff. It is estimated that this process takes approximately one half hour each day. The estimated cost to the ME's Office annually is \$4,550.

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When the AIS Call Center staff receive the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet from the ME's Office, they search the AIS Application Suite to determine if any decedents on the list have had contact with APS at any point in time. It is estimated that this process takes approximately two hours each day, with an annual operating cost to APS of approximately \$11,424.

After decedents with APS histories are identified by the AIS Call Center, the list is emailed to an APS Reviewer who reviews each case that is identified by the AIS Call Center, summarizes the relevant APS history, completes a cross report as needed, and communicates information to the ME's Office. Although the amount of time that this process takes varies, it is estimated that the APS Reviewer spends approximately two hours each day at an annual operating expense to APS of approximately \$11,063.

Both the ME's Office and APS have designated a coordinator to oversee the project. It is estimated that both coordinators dedicate approximately one hour each week to MERT at an estimated annual expense of \$5,568. The only other operating expenses for MERT are supplies which include minimal paper, photocopying and printer toner.

The total estimated annual operating expenses for MERT to the County of San Diego are approximately \$32,765. It is estimated that other counties will incur similar costs if they were to replicate MERT.

6. The Results/Success of the Program

MERT was designed to improve communication and collaboration between the ME's office and APS. It has been established that approximately 13% of all elder deaths reported to the ME's office had current or prior APS history. The most common reason for an elder to be referred to APS is neglect and/or self-neglect. This information will allow APS and other agencies with a common purpose to reduce the incidence of elder abuse to focus on neglect as a major contributing factor to elders dying under suspicious circumstances. Additionally, in at least one case, the collaboration allowed for better communication in identifying a suspected abuser implicated in several deaths. After another suspicious death, this suspected abuser was found to be the sole caregiver for another senior. By identifying this early on, APS and the County of San Diego Public Guardian were able to step in to protect this woman and her estate. Although the woman initially did not recognize the potentially hazardous situation she was in, after she was removed from the suspected abuser's care she became grateful for the County's intervention. Furthermore, APS and the ME's office discovered the importance of timeliness when exchanging information about a suspicious death. This resulted in allowing 24 hour/7 day a week access to an on-call APS worker to provide relevant information to an ME investigator when the investigator is looking into a suspicious death. As a result, the ME's office conducted further investigation and has considered

performing an autopsy in a few instances. The Medical Examiner's Review Team has also begun a public/private partnership with a local hospital group in order to ensure an even quicker response to the suspicious death of an elder.

7. Worthiness of an Award

The Medical Examiners Review Team (MERT) is an innovative project, unique in the United States. This project was initiated and designed by staff members of the Medical Examiner's office and Aging and Independence Services to pursue investigations of the suspicious deaths of some of the most vulnerable in our population, the elderly. Often, the death of a senior is overlooked by society as being anything other than natural. The MERT project recognizes that some of these deaths are the result of maltreatment and therefore deserve to be investigated in an appropriate and time sensitive manner, before the evidence disappears. There is no other project in the United States that brings together these agencies to actively search out information that could be vital when investigating a suspicious death. The team continues to look for better and more innovative ways to continue this work, including linking with a local hospital group to enhance communication. And, in at least one specific instance since this project started less than a year ago, the untimely death of a senior was avoided due to the communication and collaboration of the team members.